



Timing is Everything by LizzySong

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Summary: Sometimes life simply has the worst timing. Hopper and Joyce are MIA, El is forced to confront her past and go back to her sister for help, and the kids need Steve's help, but he's not sure how long he can keep this up. (Sickfic plus adventure plus angst. -Has the whole party, as well as Kali's gang.)

1. She Found Something

Author's Note: I got a request on my tumblr to write a fic where Steve gets sick, but the kids need his help so he hides it until he can't anymore. I hope you enjoy it! (There's not a whole lot of sick Steve in the first chapter, but there will be more as the story progresses. Kali will also enter the story soon. I ended up getting a lot more plotty with this fic than a regular sickfic...)

It had been a long day; not a particularly interesting day, but long. When Steve had woken up that morning, every muscle in his body was sore, and he just felt... off. But he chalked it up to the fact that basketball practice had been more intense than usual the previous day, and dragged himself out of bed to go to school.

Now that he was back home, however, he had the nagging feeling that there was something more to his aching limbs and the dull throbbing beginning in his head.

He flopped onto his bed, face down, not bothering to remove his jacket or shoes, or even get under the covers, falling asleep almost the moment that his head hit the pillow, hoping that he'd be able to sleep off whatever this was.

Suddenly he was awoken by the harsh ringing of the telephone he kept on his nightstand. It felt as though he'd only been asleep for only ten minutes, but upon glancing at his alarm clock, he realized it had already been over an hour.

He sighed, which turned into a couple raspy coughs, and reached for the phone, clearing his throat and speaking into the receiver, "...Hello?"

"Steve, it's Dustin," a voice said on the other line, "We need your help." The kid sounded scared and Steve sighed.

"What'd you shitheads do now?" he asked.

"El-- Jane did... something. I'll explain it when you get here-- I can't tell you over the phone."

"...Where are you?"

"The cabin."

"Okay. Stay where you are. I'll be there in twenty. *Don't move until I get there.*"

"Okay. And Steve?"

"Yeah?"

"Bring the bat."

There was a click and then a dial tone indicating that Dustin had hung up. Steve groaned and put the phone down, slowly sitting up and swinging his legs over the side of the bed as he dragged a tired hand down his face.

He loved those little shits like siblings, but damnit, they had a knack for picking the most inconvenient times to get into trouble.

He arrived at the cabin twenty minutes later, just as he'd promised, and he knocked on the door, making sure to use the secret knock Hopper had taught him so that he wouldn't scare the kids.

There was no sign that the door would be opened, so he called out, "Guys? Are you in there? El? It's Steve."

There was another minute of silence before he heard several clicks on the other side of the door, which then slowly creaked open to reveal a curly haired girl. She looked like she'd been crying, and hugged Steve as soon as she fully opened the door.

"Hey," he said as he gently wrapped his arms around her, "What the hell is going on?"

"...I'm sorry," El said, her voice wavering, "It's my fault... I... I found him."

"Found who? El, what is going on?"

"Papa," she whispered, and started sobbing.

Steve held her a little tighter then, trying to calm her down as best he could as he looked around at the other children in the cabin. They were all there, and they all looked almost as frightened as Eleven.

The teen sighed and ushered the girl into the cabin, closing the door behind them and locking it with every one of the many locks that Hopper had attached to it.

"Okay," Steve said as he lead El to to couch and sat down with her, "Does somebody wanna explain what's going on here?"

"Hopper and Mrs. Byers are M.I.A." said Dustin, "El was trying to look for them using her powers."

"She found them, but she also found..." Mike said, trailing off as he looked at the girl who was crying softly into Steve's shoulder.

"He has them," Will said in a surprisingly even voice considering that some evil scientist was holding his mother captive.

"Who has them?" Steve asked, still confused.

"...Papa..." Eleven whimpered.

"Where does he have them?"

"Somewhere else..."

"Outside of Hawkins?"

El nodded slightly, and everyone was quiet for a minute before she spoke again, "...Sister."

"...What?" everyone asked in confusion, except for Mike and Will who were the only ones El had told about her sister.

"My sister," El said again, finally lifting her head from Steve's shoulder and wiping her eyes, "She can help."

"...Do you know where she is?" Will asked, and El shook her head.

"No... But I can find her."

"Is she like you?" said Dustin, "You know, with the whole..." he trailed off, making nondescript movements with his hands.

El's head bobbed slightly in response with a quiet, "Yes."

Steve sighed and pinched the bridge of his nose for a moment, trying to fend off an impending headache, then stopped, suddenly realizing something. "Do they know about this place?" he asked, looking at El, "The bad men?"

"I don't know..." she said, fear clear in her expression.

Steve sighed again and nodded a little, "We can't stay here, then."

"I agree," said Lucas, "But where do we go?"

"If El can find her sister," Mike said, "then maybe we can stay with her."

"Do you think you can do that?" Max asked, looking at Eleven.

El nodded, "I can do it."

Eleven went into her room a few minutes later and closed the door behind her, leaving the others in the living room.

Steve was still confused as to what exactly was going on, and it didn't help that his body was still aching all over. The nap he'd taken earlier hadn't seemed to help at all -- if anything, he felt *worse* than he had before going to sleep. But these kids needed him, so there was no way he was going to be sick. He wouldn't allow it; he needed to protect these little shits.

2. Nightmare

Eleven came out of her room nearly fifteen minutes after she'd entered it, now wearing entirely different clothes from earlier -- the clothes that Kali and her friends had given to her the last time she'd lived with them. "...I found her." she said quietly.

"Where is she?" asked Mike.

"Chicago."

"Still?" this came from Will.

"Different home," said El.

"Wait," said Max to Mike and Will, "how do you know about this sister person?"

"She told us," said Mike, clearly irritated at how obvious the answer should have been.

"Why didn't you tell the rest of us?" Dustin said to Eleven, who was starting to look uncomfortable.

"She wasn't ready to talk about it, shitheads," Steve said, standing up from the couch, "It's obviously complicated, and you guys would ask way too many questions." Eleven gave to teenager a small, grateful smile which he returned.

"Now," Steve started again, this time addressing El, "If I can get us to Chicago, will you be able to find whatever place we're looking for?"

The girl nodded slightly, "Yes."

"Okay, let's go, then."

"Wha-- *now*?!" Max said, looking incredulous.

"Yes, *now*!" Steve said, imitating the way Max had said the word, "You wanna wait here for the government to find us?"

"He's right," said Mike, "We need to go before they find us. It's only a matter of time-- they already found Hopper and Mrs. Byers."

After several more minutes of discussion, the group piled into Steve's car, El in the front passenger seat and the others squeezed in the back -- it was tight, but somehow everyone managed to fit.

It was about a five hour drive just to get into the city -- it would have been four, but they'd hit traffic about half-way, much to the dismay of the group. When they did finally reach the city, it was ten-thirty, and everyone was tired; in fact both Will and Dustin had fallen asleep already, and the others didn't seem too far behind them -- except for El, who didn't think she'd be getting any sleep as she was too worried about her adoptive parents.

Steve pulled into the parking lot of the first motel he could find, announcing that they'd be staying there for the night.

"We'll find your sister tomorrow," he said to the young girl sitting next to him, "Okay?" El just nodded a little in response.

It took nearly thirty minutes to get all of the kids out of the car, pay for a room, and get everyone ready for bed. There was only one bed and one small sofa in the room. The bed went to Eleven, and the sofa to Steve, everyone else agreeing to sleep on the floor for the night.

The teen sat down on the couch while the kids were getting ready, removing his jacket and shoes, wrapping a thin blanket around himself as he finally laid down for the night.

Over the course of the five-hour drive, he'd begun to feel worse than he had when he'd arrived at the cabin, and now that he knew that he and the kids would be safe -- at least for the night -- his body simply wouldn't let him deny himself rest any longer.

He pulled the blanket closer around himself and shivered a little, closing his eyes and quickly drifting into sleep.

He only slept for a few hours, however, before he was awoken by someone shaking his shoulder.

The teen jolted awake, gasping in surprise as he did so, which turned

into a brief coughing fit. He sighed once he'd managed to stop coughing and looked up to see who had woken him.

"Steve..." Eleven whispered, looking down at her temporary guardian.

"Hey," he said, sitting up and patting the now empty spot next to him on the couch, "What happened?"

The girl sat down next to him and he draped the blanket he'd been using over her shoulders. She gave him a slight smile of gratitude and leaned into his side, resting her head on his shoulder as he wrapped a brotherly arm around her.

"I saw them..." El said finally.

"Hopper and Mrs. Byers?"

"Yes."

"...Are they okay?"

"I don't know... Joyce was yelling..." El was the only one of the party who called Joyce by her first name -- mostly because that's what she always heard Hopper call her.

"What was she saying?"

"...Me..."

"Something about you?"

The girl nodded slightly, "And..." she trailed off, looking over at Will, who was sleeping comfortably.

"She was yelling about you and Will?" Steve asked. It made sense; if Joyce was face-to-face with the man who was responsible for everything that had happened to both Will and El, then Steve wouldn't be surprised if she just flat out killed him then and there.

"Yes," Eleven said, responding to the teenager's question.

Steve nodded slightly, "They'll be okay. We'll find them. I promise."

The girl smiled a little, reassured by the boy's promise, and they sat in silence for a few minutes. Steve was beginning to doze off again when he was startled back to awareness by Eleven whispering, "Bed."

" You're going back to bed?"

"Yes," El said. She hesitated for a moment, then looked at the teenager, "...Sit with me?"

Steve nodded, "Sure."

The girl smiled again and stood up, taking the teenager by the arm and pulling him over to the bed, the blanket draped around her shoulders dragging behind her like a cape.

She crawled under the covers, abandoning the blanket-cape on the floor. Steve sat down next to her, on top of the covers, stretching his legs out in front of him and leaning his back against the headboard.

He crossed his arms over his chest and shivered a little. Eleven noticed this and leaned over the side of the bed, picking up the blanket she'd left there, then sat up and turned to Steve. "Cold," she said, handing it to him.

"Thanks," he said with a small smile, taking the blanket from her and wrapping it around his shoulders, "Now get some sleep, okay?"

The girl nodded and laid her head back down on her pillow. "...Thank you," she said softly, closing her eyes.

Morning came too quickly for the teenager, the combination of the light pouring in from the window and the sound of the kids' talking waking him.

His head felt as though it was stuffed with cotton, making it difficult for him to breathe through his nose, and his throat was dry and sore, making it hard to swallow.

Steve groaned a little and turned over to see the kids grouped together on the floor in a circle, El with a cloth tied over her eyes. She was looking for someone.

This went on for a few more moments before the girl pulled the cloth away from her eyes and nodded in confirmation that she'd found what she was looking for.

Steve slowly sat up, swinging his legs over the side of the bed. Max noticed this and stood up, going over to him. "Good, you're up," she said, "We need to go; El found her sister."

The boy nodded a little, "Okay. Just give me a minute." He stood up and went into the bathroom, closing the door behind him. He turned a knob on the sink, splashing some cold water onto his face and then looking at himself in the mirror.

He was paler than normal, and he looked tired. He sighed, which once again turned into a few coughs -- which were starting to sound deeper and as though there was a slight rattling to them. ...*Shit*, he thought, *this might not be as easy to shake off as he'd thought.*

He walked back to the group a couple minutes later and went over to the couch, putting on his shoes and grabbing his jacket.

"Alright, shitheads," he said, trying to ignore the slight raspiness and congestion in his voice, "You ready?"

The kids all nodded, evidently having not noticed the difference in Steve's voice, and the group left the motel, piling into Steve's car once again.

"You sure you know where she is?" the teen asked Eleven, who was sitting next to him in the passenger seat.

"Yes."

"Okay. You give me directions, then, alright?"

"...Directions?"

"Tell me when and where to turn and what streets to take."

The girl nodded in understanding, "Okay."

It took about half an hour of driving before they pulled up to an

abandoned warehouse. Steve turned to El with a somewhat confused look.

"...This is it," she said, looking at him.

Steve nodded and then opened his door. "Alright," he said, stepping outside of the car, "let's go."

The kids piled out of the car, and Steve opened up the trunk, grabbing his nail-riddled bat -- just in case.

They entered the building, Steve and El leading the way, finding a group of four people gathered around a trash can which had a fire burning in it in the middle of a vast, otherwise empty room.

3. Sister

"...What the hell...?" said Max quietly, though apparently loud enough to get the attention of the small group gathered around the fire.

"Who's there?" an accusatory voice called, and El started to walk towards the group, gesturing for her friends to follow her.

"It's me," El said as she got close enough for the other group to hear her, "It's Jane."

The four people who Eleven knew to be her sister's friends stared at her in shock for a moment before one of them spoke.

"Well I'll be damned," the man El remembered as the spider-hater said, "What the hell are you doing back here, Shirley? I thought you left to go help your hick friends."

"I did," the girl said.

"Then why are you here?"

"I'm gonna go get Kali," a woman said as she walked towards to other side of the room -- El thought she remembered that her name was Mick.

"Need help," Eleven said in response to Axel's question.

A minute later Mick returned with Kali, who took a hesitant step towards her sister, "Jane?"

El nodded and smiled slightly. Kali took another step closer, engulfing her sister in a tight hug. "You came back," she whispered tearfully, to which El just hugged her tightly in return.

When the older of the two finally let go of the younger, she looked at the group standing a little ways away behind Eleven, who had been watching in silence and had seemingly gone unnoticed until now.

"Who did you bring with you?" Kali asked, looking back at El.

"My friends."

Kali nodded, looking back at the party, taking an especially long look at Steve. Having lived on the street for some time before finding a real shelter, she was very familiar with illness and could tell when someone was ill by observing them for only a few minutes.

It became clear to her after only a moment of observing the teenager that he wasn't feeling well -- but none of the children he was apparently tasked with looking after seemed to have noticed this, so she didn't say anything about it.

Instead, she said "You're going to need to share rooms." Which earned her a myriad of exclamations and comments from her own friends.

"Are you serious?"

"We're not running a daycare, Kal!"

"I think they're kinda cute."

"Any friends of miss Jane are welcome here in my book."

"My sister brought her friends here. Of course they're staying with us," Kali spoke again, glancing at the sick teen one more time.

Not long after this, Kali and El went to Kali's room so that El could explain what had happened, having shown Steve and the rest of the party to rooms they could share -- though, of course, there was no way Steve was going to let any of those kids sleep in a different room than him where he might not be able to protect them. Especially not with those people, El's sister's so called friends, around.

"...What the *hell* is going on?" Max asked, pacing in front of Steve, who was sitting on a mattress on the floor, Dustin and Will sitting on either side of him.

"Yeah," said Lucas, who was standing against the wall, shooting a pointed look at Mike, who was leaning on the doorframe at the entrance of the room, "I'd like to know that, too."

"What were you expecting?" Mike said to Lucas.

"Not *this*!"

"Yeah, this is pretty weird," Dustin agreed.

"Did you see that guy with the *hair*?" said Max.

"And I thought your stepbrother's hair was bad..." Steve muttered, making all the kids snicker.

The teenager flopped onto his back, landing on the uncomfortable mattress. He closed his eyes for a second, resting his forearms over them. "How the hell'd we end up here?" he said, more to himself than the kids.

"Well..." Mike said in response, "You drove us here." earning a glare from Steve and more snickers from the other kids.

"You know what I mean, dickhead," Steve said, still glaring at Mike, who was smiling a little.

The teen sat back up, slowly, though his head still swam a little and he pinched the bridge of his nose, trying to fend off the pain.

Only Will seemed to notice this, however, the others already having gone back to talking about Kali and her friends. The younger boy put a hesitant hand on Steve's shoulder and asked, "Hey... Are you okay...?"

"What?" Steve said, surprised, "Oh... Yeah, I'm fine." He gave the kid a small, reassuring smile, which seemed to satisfy him. Will nodded slightly and looked away.

"...Are *you* okay?" the teenager asked, looking at the younger boy, who shrugged a little.

"I don't..." Will started, "I don't know... It feels weird... being on this side of things. I thought it'd be easier, but..."

Steve nodded a little and wrapped an arm around Will's shoulders, "Yeah... I get it. ...We're gonna find them, though. They'll be okay. ...I promise." Will nodded a little and gave Steve a slight smile, momentarily reassured.

Meanwhile in another room, El was explaining to Kali what had happened to her guardians and why she'd come back.

"...You found him?" Kali asked, referring to Doctor Brenner.

"Yes. He took them."

"He's trying to trap you again, Jane. He's luring you back to him."

"...Luring?"

"Trying to bring you back to him by tempting you with something you want."

Eleven nodded slightly in understanding, and Kali continued, "You can't simply walk in and expect to save your friends. He will trap you again. You understand that, don't you?"

"I can't leave them there."

"And we're not going to. But we need to strategise; we need to find more information -- where he is, where he's keeping your friends, specific addresses -- things you won't be able to find by only using your gifts. ...We'll need to find more of his men. People who are still in contact with him."

El looked down at her hands. "Like last time?" she asked.

Kali nodded, "Yes. Like last time."

"...Kill..."

"You don't have to. I've told you before, Jane, it's your choice. If you want to show mercy, it's your decision."

El nodded slightly, still not making eye contact with her sister.

"We will find your policeman. I will get you back to him, I promise, but it's not going to be easy."

"...Thank you," Eleven said quietly, and Kali gave her a small smile. "You are my sister," the older of the two said, simply, "We need to

take care of each other."

4. War Room

Author's Note: Just wanted to say thanks for all the wonderful comments and all the favorites and follows! I'm so happy you're all enjoying reading this fic as much as I'm enjoying writing it!

Now without further ado, here is Chapter Four!

Soon everyone was gathered in a room that's walls were covered in photos and papers, pieces of red string attaching them to each other. It was a step up from the single wall Kali had used at her last hide-out, and El couldn't help but look around at it in slightly frightened awe.

"Jesus..." Steve said softly, looking around at the room with close to the same expression as El.

"Holy shit," said Mike and Dustin in unison.

"What the hell is this place?" this came from Max, to which Lucas replied, "It's a war room."

"It looks like a serial killer's room," Steve said, earning glares from Kali's gang.

Will didn't say a word as he stared at the walls around him, reminded all too well of the map of the upside down that had filled the walls of his home only a few months earlier. Mike noticed Will's reaction to his surrounding and put a reassuring hand on his friend's shoulder, getting a small smile out of him.

"...There's more," El said to Kali, referring to the people pictured on the walls.

"Yes," the older sister said, "We've found more of them. Do you recognize any?"

Eleven slowly moved around the room, looking at the faces of the men and women who had hurt so many -- not only people like her and Kali, but also people like Barb who didn't have any sort of affiliation with the lab.

"Him..." she said after an overwhelming minute of looking at the photos, "He hurt me."

Kali walked over to her, taking the photo off of the wall and reading the name written on it in red ink. "Jonah Tennyson," she read aloud, looking back up at Eleven, "Do you think you can find him?"

El nodded, a quiet "Yes" escaping her lips.

"Wait, *what?!'*" Steve said, walking over to the sisters, "You want her to find someone who *hurt* her? Are you insane?!"

"No," Kali responded calmly, "I am simply being strategic. If she uses her gifts to find this man, then we can get to him faster."

"Get to hi-- *kill* him?"

"No," Dottie said jokingly, "Maim, though, maybe." This earned her a few laughs from the group of outcasts, and frightened looks from the kids -- except, surprisingly, from El who was very calm.

"No way. No," Steve said, still looking at Kali, "You are not using El for some psychotic crusade! She came to you for help, and you're taking advantage of that."

"I *am* helping her," Kali said, a slight edge to her tone now, "and *Jane* can decide for herself whether she wants to find this man or not. I have never forced her to do anything. She has always been free to make her own decisions when she is with me. Can the same be said for when she's in your care?"

"Of course not!" Steve said incredulously, "She's thirteen; I'm not going to just let her do whatever the hell she wants-- not when it could get her hurt! This isn't the same thing as letting a kid eat a whole box of frozen waffles when her dad already said no; this is life and death, and a thirteen-year-old shouldn't be put in the position to make those kinds of decisions. That's not fair to ask of her."

He was starting to feel lightheaded from the adrenaline that had suddenly shot through him and from what he suspected to be the start of a fever. *Just what he needed right now; perfect.* He had placed a protective hand on El's shoulder while arguing with Kali, and was

now steadying himself by leaning into the girl's shoulder slightly--something that did not escape Kali's attention.

"Steve..." El said calmly, looking up at the teenager, "I can do it. It's the only way."

Steve sighed, "El, you're too young for this shit."

"It's the only way to get them back."

"No it's not. We can find another way; I'll go in there by myself if I have to. You don't have to do this."

"...I *want* to."

The teenager sighed again, wanting to stop the girl from doing something so dangerous; but he was feeling weaker by the second and was starting to get dizzy. He leaned a little more heavily on Eleven's shoulder and searched her large, dark eyes for any sign that she didn't want to go through with this, but all he was met with was a look of pure determination.

"Shit..." he muttered to himself before speaking to the girl, "...Fine. But there's gonna be ground rules: you don't put yourself in any immediate danger, and I'm not leaving your side. Anywhere you go, I go. Got it kid?"

El nodded and smiled a little, "Got it."

It didn't take long for Eleven to find the man she was looking for, a bandana tied around her eyes as she gripped the picture of Jonah Tennyson. Both groups gathered around to watch her; Steve with a clearly worried expression, and Mike with a proud, admiring smile. Despite everything that was going on, he was always amazed by the things El could do.

After a couple minutes she pulled the bandana off of her eyes and looked at her sister, nodding slightly and sluggishly bleeding from one of her nostrils. Kali smiled, she and her friends immediately getting to work finding the location of the man based on the information El was able to give them.

Another twenty minutes went by, and El sat with her head on Mike's shoulder, his arm around her to keep her steady. She was always a little drained after finding someone, and as she'd been doing it so much lately, this one left her slightly more tired than normal, so she went to Mike for support.

Finally Kali announced where they were going, and she and her friends -- as well as Eleven -- sprung into action.

Steve sighed and stood up from the chair he'd been sitting in. "Alright," he said, addressing the party-minus-El, "You're staying here. I don't think anybody knows about this place, so you should be safe for the few hours we'll be gone."

"What?!" Mike said.

"We're coming with you," said Dustin.

"You really think we'd be any safer here, anyway?" this came from Max.

"You can't leave us here, Man," Lucas said.

They were speaking over each other, making Steve's head hurt a little. Only Will was quiet; noticing the difference in the babysitter, who would normally be arguing with the kids instead of standing quietly.

"My job is to keep you shitheads safe," Steve said once the exclamations from the kids had died down a little, "and that's what I'm doing. I'm not bringing you on a crusade -- I don't even want to go, I'd rather stay here with you, but I'm not leaving El alone with those people; I don't trust them to take care of her. I *do* trust you guys to take care of each other though, so you're staying here, and taking care of each other until I get back. Understand?"

The kids reluctantly agreed, much to Steve's surprise, and he soon left with El and Kali's gang, his nail-riddled bat slung over his shoulder.

5. Mercy

The ride to find Jonah Tennyson was long.

Steve sat in the far back of the van, El sitting between Kali and himself. He had a protective arm around the young girl as he stared out the window tiredly. The others in the van had music playing loudly, which only made Steve feel worse, and he eventually rested his head against the window he was looking out of, closing his eyes tightly against the pain in his head.

Kali had been observing the boy and wondered how long he was going to be able to continue on like this. Jane and her friends had only been with her for less than a day, but in the few hours since she'd met Steve, he'd only seemed to have gotten worse.

Eventually they pulled up in front of an apartment complex and everyone except Mick, who was instructed to keep the vehicle running, piled out of the van.

Steve stopped El for a second, putting a hand on her shoulder, "You sure you wanna do this? We can still leave and find another way. You don't have to go through with this."

Once again he was met with a look of determination from the thirteen-year-old, "I can do it."

Steve nodded a little and sighed, "Okay. Let's get this over with, then." They quickly caught up with Kali and the others, who were now wearing cheap, plastic Halloween masks.

"Here," Kali said, handing El the same baby doll mask she had worn the last time she'd worked with the gang, and Steve one that looked like a darker version of Casper the ghost.

"I'm not wearing this shit," the eighteen-year-old said, looking at the mask that had been handed to him.

"If you show your face, you put us all at risk," Kali said, an edge of annoyance in her tone.

"Jesus, kid, we don't have time for this!" said Axel, "Put it on or wait in the van."

El nudged her temporary guardian, who reluctantly conceded. "Fine," he said with a sigh, putting the mask on.

The group made their way to Jonah's apartment on the top floor of the complex, Eleven unlocking the door with her powers and then leading everyone inside.

They quickly found the man they were looking for, sitting on a small sofa, reading a book.

El stopped in her tracks upon seeing the man, her heart racing as memories of being dragged, kicking and screaming, through the halls of Hawkins lab, and being thrown unceremoniously into solitary confinement.

Both Kali and Steve noticed the girl's hesitation, and they both placed a reassuring hand on either of the girl's shoulders.

"You're in control now, Jane," Kali whispered, "He can't hurt you anymore."

Eleven nodded slightly, taking a deep, shuddering breath and stepping forward, Kali at her side with Steve and the others following close behind them.

"Hello, Jonah," Kali said, getting the man's attention. He jumped, dropping his book, and grabbing something from underneath the couch cushion he was sitting on.

He pointed the object at Kali and El realized it was a handgun. Steve instinctively pulled the young girl close to him, ready to shield her if need be.

There was a knowing smile playing on Kali's lips as she looked at the weapon pointed at her, though of course her mask hid her expression.

"Stay back!" the man shouted and Kali slowly put her hands up, though she'd only raised them half-way before El had forced the gun out of Jonah's hand, throwing it across the room, with just a small

jerk of her head.

The scientist stared at the girl in shock as she removed her mask and revealed her face.

"Number Eleven?" he asked, and El nodded slowly. "They told me you were dead. You can't be here!"

"Wrong," the girl said, taking another step towards the man. "Where is he?" she asked after a few long seconds of silence.

"What?"

"*Where is Papa?*"

"I don't know."

"Lie!" Eleven yelled angrily, throwing her arm out and forcing the man across the room and against a wall, "*Where is Papa?!*"

The man remembered hearing stories at the lab about how number eleven had killed several men in an instant when they'd thrown her in solitary -- at Brenner's command -- and stared at the girl in fear for a moment.

El saw the fear in the man's eyes and felt a strange sort of satisfaction at how the tables had finally turned in her favor.

She slowly raised her arm farther, her fingers tensing into a claw-like shape while the man slid up the wall, being strangled by the young girl.

"Where is he?!" she screamed.

"Okay--!" Jonah choked out, "I'll tell you-- just let me down."

El slowly lowered the scientist to the ground and walked towards him, kneeling down in front of him.

"Where?" she asked in a quiet, dangerous voice, leaning her face only inches from his own.

"I have all the information about the project in my bedside table," the man said between gasps and splutters.

Dottie, who was still standing in the background with Axel, Funshine, and Steve, nodded and grabbed Axel's arm, dragging him to the bedroom of the small apartment.

Dottie rummaged through the drawers of the bedside table until she found a large binder. She paged through it a little to make sure it was what she was looking for, and finding that it was. She stood up, pocketing a couple bottles of prescription drugs she'd also found in the table, and grabbing Axel, who had been practically tearing the room apart looking for any cash or valuables, by the arm again, dragging him back into the main room of the apartment.

"Got it," Dottie said, handing the binder to Kali, who flipped through a couple pages before nodding in confirmation to Eleven.

The youngest in the group stood up again, staring down at the man who had hurt her on her so-called father's orders.

She slowly reached her arm out, once again making the claw-like shape with her hand as she choked the scientist.

"Please," the man gasped, only being met with a cold gaze from the girl.

"Don't let him go, Jane. He wouldn't be so kind to you," Kali said, walking next to her sister.

El strengthened her hold on the man's throat as she stared the man dead in the eyes.

Then, suddenly, her eyes widened and softened a little. Seeing the fear in the man's eyes along with what Kali had said echoing in her mind, made her remember the way she'd felt during the things that the scientist had done to her; and she realized that she didn't want to inflict the same kind of pain and fear -- even if it was to someone who deserved it. She didn't want to turn into the type of monster she spent so long trying to get away from -- a thin line that Kali had been treading for a long time now.

She let go of the man, tears springing in her eyes. "I can't..." she said softly, "I can't do it..."

"Jane," Kali started, "He didn't show you mercy."

"...I know. But I can't..."

Kali stared at her sister for a moment before turning back to the man on the ground, reaching into the pocket of her coat and bringing out a handgun.

Steve noticed what Kali was doing, and quickly grabbed Eleven by the upper arm, turning her so she faced him instead of the scene that was playing out just behind her, ripping his mask off in the process. He held her head to his chest, covering her exposed ear with his hand so that the gunshot wouldn't be as loud. --It was at this point that she started crying.

Kali finished the scientist off, quickly and efficiently, with no other emotion besides contempt. As soon as she'd finished the task at hand, she, along with everyone else, heard police sirens blaring.

"Shit! Kal, we gotta go!" Axel said and Kali nodded once, heading for the door behind her friends. Steve and El didn't move, El burying her face in the boy's chest as he stared at the limp body on the ground. Kali grabbed the teenager's shoulder, dragging him and El to the door.

They ran down the many staircases of the building to get to the front where Mick was waiting for them in the van. Funshine threw the back door open, ushering the others in before entering himself.

Steve, El and Kali sat in the same places they had when they'd left the hide out, in the very back of the van with El sitting between Kali and Steve. Now the young girl had her face buried in the boy's shoulder and he had a protective arm around her.

He was breathing heavily -- too heavily for the amount of physical activity he'd just endured, especially being an athlete -- and he suddenly broke into a painful sounding coughing fit.

This earned attention from everyone in the van, but he didn't care,

too preoccupied by trying to be able breathe. El lifted her head to look at him worriedly, placing her hand on his back -- it was at this point that she noticed the heat radiating off of him, and she looked to her sister, anxiety clear in her eyes. "Sick," she said and Kali nodded slightly.

6. Rest

Author's Note: Just wanted to say thanks for all the lovely comments and favorites and follows! I'm so glad you're enjoying this fic! And Happy Holidays everyone!

Now without further ado, chapter six!

Steve slowly woke up, immediately realizing that he was lying on an extremely lumpy and uncomfortable mattress. He vaguely recalled arriving at the warehouse and being helped inside by El and Kali; and Mike exclaiming "Holy shit, what happened to you?!" when he'd seen the teenager.

Steve had been both relieved and surprised to find all the kids still in the same place he'd left them several hours earlier, and suspected that Will had talked them into staying put. Whenever the kids actually listened to Steve, it was usually because Will had convinced them to, and the teen was grateful to the kid for this -- now more than ever.

"Hey, *hey!* He's waking up!" a girl's voice said -- Steve was pretty sure it was Max.

"Hey, buddy..." that had to be Dustin -- he was the only one who called Steve *buddy*, "How're you feeling?"

Steve just groaned a little in response and slowly opened his eyes to see four figures leaning over him, looking down at him with concern. He started to sit up, leaning his back against the makeshift headboard (which was really just a wall that the mattress had been pushed up against), and noticed something fall from his face on his lap. Upon closer inspection he realized it was a damp cloth. ...Had he really had that bad of a fever?

He cleared his throat, though it did little to lessen the raspiness in his voice, and asked "...How long was I out?"

Lucas checked his watch and looked back at the teen, "Like an hour. --Why didn't you say something?"

"You guys needed me," Steve said as if it were the most obvious thing in the world, "...Where's El?"

"With Mike," said Dustin, "sitting by the fire."

Steve nodded a little, reassured by the fact that El had her favorite person around to comfort her after what she'd just experienced. They sat quietly for a minute, the kids still staring at Steve with worry; which strengthened when the teenager was suddenly doubled over in a harsh, deep sounding, coughing fit.

Dustin patted his friend's back while he coughed, trying to do what little he could to help the eighteen-year-old.

"We gotta get you some medicine," Lucas said.

"Kali said she was going to get some," said Will.

"Yeah, like half-an-hour ago," Max said in an irritated tone.

Finally the teen managed to stop coughing, and leaned back against the wall with a groan, trying to catch his breath. "...Where is Kali?" he asked.

"She said she was gonna find some medicine," said Dustin.

"But she's been gone for a while, now," Lucas said.

"I think she needed a minute to calm down," said Will, "She looked really shaken."

"Yeah," Max said, "What the hell happened while you guys were gone?"

"Some really weird shit that I don't totally understand."

"Did she use her powers?" Dustin asked.

"El? Yeah."

"No, Kali."

"No. I don't know what she can do -- but that might be a good thing."

He sighed, which caught in his chest and forced a few more rough coughs out of him, and brought his legs over the side of the mattress.

He closed his eyes and pressed the heels of his hands into them for a second before standing up.

"Where do you think you're going?" Max asked, crossing her arms and looking up at the teenager from where she was sitting on the mattress.

"To find Kali. I need to talk to her about something."

"You need to rest!" Dustin said, "You're really sick."

Steve rolled his eyes at that, "It's just a cold. I'll be fine."

"No, man," Lucas said, "You're *really* sick. El and her sister had to basically drag you up the stairs to get you in here. You need to take it easy."

"Yeah," said Will, "You had a really high fever, too. --We can find Kali for you if you want."

"Guys," Steve said, a slight edge to his voice, "I'm *fine*." It was at this point, of course, that his body chose to protest to his words and make it clear exactly how *not fine* he was with a painful coughing fit that had him doubled over, his hands on his knees for support.

Dustin quickly stood up and guided the teen back to the mattress, sitting him back down despite the teen's weak protests between coughs.

"Steve," Max said once the teen had managed to stop coughing, "You need to rest. We're safe here, and we won't even leave this room if it'll make you feel better. *Please* just relax for a couple hours."

Steve could see that she was worried -- maybe even a little scared -- and he sighed. With everything else that these kids could be worried about, they were worried about *him*. And he hated when the kids were worried about him; especially when there were worse things happening than him having a bad cold -- that was the worst he was going to admit to having, anyway. Just an extremely inconvenient

cold. But he *could* use some rest, even if he didn't want to admit it.

"...Will you stop harassing me if I do?" he asked, trying to hide the fact that he wanted nothing more than to curl up under a blanket and sleep this off.

The kids all nodded and he sighed again, though it was more a sigh of relief than anything else, flopping back onto the mattress with a quiet "*Fine.*"

While this discussion was happening, El and Mike were sitting in front of the garbage can that had a fire burning inside it. El hadn't said much, but Mike knew that something was bothering her, and it wasn't only that their designated babysitter had seemed to suddenly come down with the plague, or that Hopper and Mrs. Byers were being held hostage by the man who had raised and tortured her for twelve years.

They sat in silence for a long time, El resting her head on Mike's shoulder, silent tears occasionally rolling down her cheeks. Mike didn't try to force her to talk about whatever had happened, he simply stayed with her in quiet support, holding her hand and making sure she knew he was there for her.

Meanwhile, Kali was sitting in her own room, alone, the binder filled with information about Brenner's newest experimental lab open on her lap. It was horrifying, and it brought back memories that she thought she'd pushed to the back of her mind never to be thought of again.

A few tears involuntarily forced their way out of her eyes and onto the pages, smudging the ink on some of the hand-written notes in the margins of certain pages -- handwriting she recognized as her so-called father's.

She sighed shakily and closed the binder, deciding she couldn't stomach looking at it any longer, and stood up. She'd told Jane's friends that she was going to find medicine for the oldest of them who was admittedly in pretty bad shape. That was a while ago now -- how long she wasn't entirely sure, but she knew that it was long enough that if she didn't return to them soon, the children would

most likely come looking for her.

The young woman then knelt down and pulled a box out from under her bed filled with medical supplies she kept on hand just in case. After rummaging through it for several minutes she found a bottle of pills to relieve pain and fever that were, by some miracle, not expired. Perfect. There was nothing that would help that boy's cough, however. ...Maybe Dottie had something in her large collection of prescription drugs that weren't her own that could help him. Kali made a mental not to ask later, but right now she needed to get back to the small group of children she had left earlier before they started wandering around the warehouse looking for her and getting lost themselves.

She made her way back to the room that she'd left earlier and found the teenager and all of the children -- including El and Mike who had decided to check up on their temporary guardian. Upon laying eyes on the sick boy lying on the mattress, looking positively miserable, she couldn't help but think she should have intervened sooner.

She hesitated, feeling like an intruder on the small makeshift family, then knocked on the side of the doorway, seven pairs of eyes suddenly looking at her.

7. Comfort

"May I sit?" Kali asked, nodding to the mattress. The kids looked at Steve -- except for El, who was looking down at her hands and refusing to look at anyone -- and the teenager nodded, gesturing for the kids to make room for Kali.

The young woman walked over to the group and joined them on the already crowded mattress. "Here," she said after a moment, handing Steve the bottle of pills she'd found, "These should help."

He took them from her gratefully and took the cap off, tipping a couple of the tablets into his palm. "Don't you need some water or something?" Mike asked; to which Steve shook his head a little in response. "S'fine," he said, popping the pills into his mouth.

Kali had been watching her sister since she'd entered the room, and she could tell that the young girl was just as shaken as Kali herself was -- if not more so -- and she sighed quietly. She turned to the other children and asked, "May I have a moment alone with your brother?"

Once again, six heads turned to look at Steve, who nodded his consent. Once the kids had left the room, Steve crossed his arms over his chest and looked at Kali expectantly.

"I want to help her," Kali said after a moment, "I know what you think of me, but you can't help her the way I can."

"Trying to get her to kill people isn't helping her."

"I only kill people who deserve it -- but this isn't about killing people. This is about Jane confronting her pain -- her past -- so that she can heal."

Steve stared at her skeptically for a few moments before speaking, "Has it helped *you*?"

"What?"

"Has confronting your past helped you? Are you happy?"

"What I am doing is not about being happy. It's about--"

--Revenge. And I get it --really -- but what you're doing, this crusade your on, this isn't healthy. And it's not fair to drag El into this."

"...I frighten you, don't I?" It was more of a statement than a question.

"Well I did see you gun down a man tonight."

"An evil man. A man who hurt our sister. A man who would have continued to hurt other's sisters and brothers if I had shown him mercy."

"...*Our* sister?" Steve asked, staring at the young woman sitting in front of him in surprise.

"Jane considers you her brother, does she not?"

"...I-- I don't... I mean... I guess...?"

Kali smiled slightly in spite of herself. It was clear to her, as it would be to nearly anyone who saw the teenager interact with those children, that Steve was very much the big brother of the group; and so it was amusing to her that the boy himself didn't see it.

"The point is--" Steve started after a moment, but was interrupted by several coughs. He gave a somewhat frustrated sigh and tried again, his voice a little more rough than before, "The point is that El is too young to be part of this *thing* your doing. And as her sister, you should want to protect the tiny bit of innocence she has left, instead of taking it away by having her murder people."

"She's killed before."

"Yeah, in *self defense*. This is different. This is--"

Before he could finish, however, a red-haired girl poked her head around the doorframe. "Can we come back now?" she asked, and Steve sighed, nodding slightly. "Yeah," he said, "Sure." He gave the kids a tired smile as they reentered the room and gathered on the mattress again. Kali stood up, thinking that the group wouldn't want her around.

"Where are you going?" El asked, surprising everyone.

"There's something I need to do. I'll come back later, though. Don't worry."

She briefly considered offering for El to help her sort through the information they had received from their latest mark, but decided against it, the things Steve had said echoing in her mind. The teenager had had a point, although she didn't want to admit it; El was still just a kid, and if it was painful for Kali to go through the information herself, then she knew it would be much more painful for El.

El nodded slightly in response and leaned into Mike a little bit, clearly tired, and Kali left without another word.

It was already close to midnight at this point and all of the kids were visibly tired; no one more so than Steve, however, and the temporary guardian of the group insisted that everyone get ready for bed. Much to his surprise, none of them fought him on this -- even Mike, who still tended to give the babysitter trouble, although he had started getting along with Steve better over the past few months -- and they were all lying relatively comfortably on the floor. They'd found blankets and pillows fairly quickly, although there weren't enough for each of them to have their own, requiring Mike and El to pair up -- something El certainly didn't mind, having wanted to be close to Mike after what had happened earlier that night anyway.

Dustin had gotten Steve an extra blanket, disputing every protest from the teen with "You're sick, you need it more than any of us do," or simply shushing him until he stopped arguing.

It didn't take long for everyone to fall asleep -- everyone except Steve, who was lying awake and staring at the dark ceiling. He always had trouble sleeping when he was sick, even when he was in his own bed. Now, trying to sleep on a lumpy mattress, in a cold and drafty warehouse, with a body-racking cough that only seemed to be getting worse, there was no way he'd be able to fall asleep tonight.

He was surprised that the kids were getting any sleep considering he couldn't stop coughing -- loudly -- and he was pretty sure it was

echoing throughout the warehouse with every cough. Somehow they were all comfortably asleep, though, and that was a small relief to the babysitter.

Steve wasn't sure how long he'd been lying there, time becoming non-existent in the dark and quiet of the night, when there was a soft knock at the doorway. He looked over and saw a familiar figure standing there which he knew to be El's sister.

"May I come in?" she asked softly and Steve sat up a little, nodding his consent.

"Yeah," the teenager said, "sure."

Kali walked over to the mattress, sitting on the edge of it, and looked at the boy. She couldn't make him out well in the dim light, but it was clear that he was miserable and wanted nothing more than to sleep, and she couldn't help but feel bad for him.

"I brought you something," she said as she handed him a bottle of liquid medicine.

"...What is it?" he asked, looking at the bottle skeptically.

"It'll help with that cough, *and* help you sleep."

Steve took the bottle and hesitantly opened it, sniffing the contents as though checking for poison -- although he wouldn't have known what poison would smell like, even if he *could* smell anything through his excruciatingly stuffed up nose.

Kali sighed exasperatedly, "It's safe, I promise. Please, just take it. If Axel interrupts me while I'm trying to work *one more time* just to complain about your coughing, I very well might kill him."

This earned a small, amused smile from the teen who nodded slightly and took a swig from the bottle, capped it, and handed it back to Kali, who placed it on the floor next to the bed. "Now get some sleep," she said, "You're going to need it."

Steve wasn't entirely sure what that meant, but it didn't inspire confidence. He was too tired to question her about it, though, and

lied down, curling up under the blankets that Dustin had insisted he take.

Kali stared at him for a minute, seeing how miserable he was, and remembering the brief time she'd had something of a family shortly after she escaped from the lab. She was, understandably, prone to nightmares, and remembered how her adoptive mother would sit with her until she'd fallen back asleep any time she had one of these nightmares.

This wasn't very different from those nights, and although she knew the teenager would be considered "too old" to have someone sit up with him while he was sick, she didn't feel right leaving him alone in this state.

"...Move," she said, sitting next to him.

"...What?"

"Move over."

He did as he was told and Kali sat next to him, resting her back against the wall and stretching her legs out in front of her -- just as Steve had done the previous night at the motel when Eleven had wanted him to sit up with her.

"...You don't have to do this," Steve said, looking up at Kali from where he was lying, "You don't have to take care of me, I'll be fine. I know you hate me, and that's fine, but you don't have to watch over me -- I can take care of myself."

He turned away from her, pulling the blanket closer around his shoulders and closing his eyes. Believing that Kali hated him didn't really bother him, but he didn't want her to feel like she had to take care of him just because he was sick.

Kali stared down at him for a minute in surprise. "I don't hate you," she said eventually and Steve turned onto his back to look at her again, a slightly confused expression on his face.

"...You don't?"

Kali shook her head, still looking down at the boy, "No. ...It's just..."

"...Just what?"

"Just that... When I see you with Jane... and the others... and how much you care about them... It reminds me that I don't have that anymore. So sometimes it hurts to look at you. ...But I don't hate you."

"...What happened?"

"When I escaped from the lab, I found a family who took me in, just like Jane found all of you. But they couldn't protect me, and I lost them."

"I'm sorry," Steve said, taking her hand and giving it a gentle squeeze.

She smiled slightly, quickly wiping away the tears that had gathered in her eyes with her free hand. "Now get some sleep," she said after a few moments, and the teenager at her side nodded slightly, absentmindedly pressing his head against her side for comfort, not unlike a cat.

Kali didn't try to push him away, finding it endearing how affectionate the boy was in this state of exhaustion... as well as possibly being just a little bit high on the medicine he'd taken earlier.

She sighed a little and leaned further into the wall -behind her, feeling like part of a family for the first time since she'd lost her own makeshift family. --Her collection of outcasts wasn't quite a family. She cared about them, of course, but it was... different. Different in a way she couldn't quite describe, but that she seemed to understand as she lay surrounded by children, with a sick teenager, who really couldn't have been much younger than herself, pressed up against her side, seeking comfort.

8. Morning

Author's Note: Hello everyone! I'm sorry for the delay in posting this chapter -- the holidays got in the way a bit. Hope you enjoy it, though. And Happy New Year!

It was pitch black and quiet, except for the sound of water splashing a little with every step she took. Eleven didn't usually dream the way everyone else did; instead she always wound up in the in-between place where she looked for people. Sometimes she found people by accident in her sleep, people her subconscious wanted her to look for -- sometimes it was her mother, or her aunt Becky, sometimes it was other members of the party or Joyce or even Steve, a lot of the time it was Mike -- but mostly she was just alone in the dark and quiet place.

She hadn't expected to find anyone when she'd gone to sleep that night. She was so tired and she'd been using her abilities a lot over the past forty-eight hours, too much, and most of the people she tended to check up on were sleeping in the same room as her; so she assumed it would just be her in the dark, empty space she went to every night.

It came as a surprise, then, when she heard a familiar voice coming out of the darkness. "Listen kid," the voice said, and she recognized it immediately as Hopper's voice, "I don't know if you can hear me -- I don't know how this works -- but if you *can* hear me, I want you to know I'm okay. *We're* okay. ...Stay hidden, keep yourself safe, and I will find you as soon as I can. I promise. Just-- just stay safe, okay? Please. I don't want to lose you."

She couldn't see him anywhere when she looked around the vast, empty darkness, but she could hear his voice clearly. His voice sounded slightly strained, as if he were in pain, but it still came as a great comfort to her and she smiled, tears in her eyes. He was alive, and so was Joyce, and he was talking to her.

She didn't know how to reply, not being able to see him, but now she had more hope than she did before that things might work out after all.

Suddenly she woke up and realized that her cheeks were wet with tears. She quickly wiped them away and took in her surroundings. It was still late at night and she looked around the dark room, seeing that everyone was still seemingly asleep. She heard soft snoring coming from the mattress and saw a lump of blankets that she knew to be Steve, and then noticed that there was someone sitting next to him, slumped against the wall, also asleep, and realized that it was Kali.

El's eyes widened in surprise slightly, but she didn't have long to dwell on it because a small voice pulled her out of her train of thought.

"El?" She turned around to find where the voice was coming from and found Will sitting up and looking at her. "Are you okay?" he asked and she nodded.

"I just..." she started, the trailed off.

"...Do you wanna talk about it?"

El nodded and Will walked over to her, his blanket folded up in his arms, and was careful not to step on any of his sleeping friends. "Let's go downstairs so we don't wake them up," he said, and El slowly stood up, careful not to wake Mike.

The two of them tiptoed down the stairs to the vast, empty room they had first met Kali's gang in and went over to the fire that was still burning lowly in the trash can. It gave off just enough warmth when they were close enough to it and they sat down near it, leaning into each other for extra warmth. Will wrapped his blanket around both of their shoulders and El smiled.

Ever since El closed the gate and finally, properly met Will, they had become like siblings. Will could always tell when El was upset and vice versa, El could always tell when something was wrong with Will.

"What happened?" Will asked eventually.

"I heard him..."

"Who?"

"Hopper."

"Is he okay? ...I--is mom... okay...?" He hesitated before he asked the second question, not sure if wanted to know the answer. He'd been keeping a brave face through all of this, but he was scared. He didn't know what he would do without his mother. He loved Jonathan, of course, but he didn't understand Will in the same way that Joyce did.

El nodded a little in response to the boy's question, "Yes... They're both okay... They're alive..."

Will gave a sigh of relief and leaned into El's side slightly, and neither said another word. It was quiet and peaceful as the surrogate siblings sat in the empty warehouse, the only sound coming from the crackling fire in front them. Neither of them got any more sleep, but they were safe and relatively comfortable, so they didn't mind.

By the time Steve woke up it was late into the morning. He slowly opened his eyes to the blinding light of day that was pouring through the numerous windows of the warehouse and took in his surroundings. The first thing he noticed was that Kali was no longer beside him, and he briefly wondered when she had left before he looked around the room to make sure all the kids were alright. Mike, Lucas, and Dustin were all still asleep, but El, Will, and Max were nowhere to be found.

"Shit!" he said, adrenaline suddenly shooting through his veins. He quickly threw the covers off of himself and slipped on his shoes, not bothering to tie them, then practically ran down the stairs to the main part of the warehouse.

"El?" he called out, anxiety clear in his painfully rough voice, "Max? Will?" He reached the large room at the bottom of the stairs and saw that El and Will were sitting in front of the fire, letting out a sigh of relief.

The two children looked back at the babysitter who was now walking towards them, having heard him calling for them. "Steve?" Will asked, "Are you okay?"

"I'm fine. Where's Max?"

"Kitchen," El said, and Steve stared at her in surprise for a moment.

"...There's a kitchen?"

"Well, there's a toaster and a box of pop tarts," said Will.

Steve sighed and pinched the bridge of his nose for a second in a combination of exasperation and exhaustion, "Where is it?"

El pointed to a doorway at the far end of the warehouse and Steve nodded a little, "Okay. You two *stay here*."

The kids nodded and the eighteen-year-old made his way to the room El had pointed to. When he got close enough to the doorway he could hear people talking from inside.

"I see you, and I raise you ten," said the voice of young girl who Steve knew must be Max.

"That's was a mistake, young lady."

"We'll see about that. I always know when somebody's bluffing."

The teenager stopped in the doorway, seeing Max, Funshine, and Dottie sitting around a small table, playing cards, a small pile of cash in the middle of said table.

"Max, what the hell are you doing?" Steve said finally, getting the attention of the small group.

"Winning," Max said with a small smirk before turning back to her cards.

Steve rolled his eyes and sat down in an empty chair between Max and Dottie. Max glanced at him as he sat down, a little concerned by the fact that he wasn't reprimanding her for gambling with some people she hardly knew. He still looked like shit; his hair was messy, which was honestly the most worrying thing to her because Steve's hair was always perfect -- it was a point of pride with him -- and he just looked disheveled and... tired in general. He did, at least, seem less feverish, however, and that came as a small relief to the girl.

"You doing okay there, kid?" Funshine asked Steve, "You didn't seem so good yesterday."

"Huh?" Steve said as he came out of his dazed trance, "Oh-- yeah I'm fine."

"You don't look fine," Dottie said, noticing how pale he was, "You want somethin' to eat?"

"No..." the teenager said absentmindedly, starting to stand up again, "Where's Kali?"

"In the room where she keeps all the information about the men we go after," said Funshine, "I'd leave her alone if I were you, though. She doesn't like to be disturbed when she's working."

"She's just gonna have to deal with it," Steve said, making his way to the doorway again. Max watched him go for a few seconds before following quickly behind him.

"Steve, wait!" she said, pausing when she reached the doorway, looking back at the two people sitting at the table, "I'll be right back-- and don't look at my cards. I'll know."

Steve waited for her when he heard her calling after him, "What's wrong?" he asked when she was standing in front of him, a little worry in his voice.

"Are you sure you're okay? You still look like shit."

"Gee, thanks."

Max rolled her eyes, "You know what I mean. You should go back to bed for a while."

"Max, I'll be fine."

"Steve, you didn't even tie your shoes."

The teenager knelt down to tie his shoes then, having forgotten that he hadn't done so earlier. "That's because I thought something happened to you, El and Will. I didn't have time," he said and stood

back up, looking down at the girl and seeing how worried she really was. "Hey..." he started again, softening a little, "I'll be fine. I promise."

"Yeah?" Max asked, looking up at him.

"Yeah."

Max nodded slightly, reassured for the time being, and gave the teenager a quick hug before returning to the room that really couldn't be called a kitchen to continue the card game she was playing.

Kali was sitting on the floor of the "war room" as Lucas had called it, sheets of paper from the binder she had gotten the night before spread out around her as she tried to sort through them all. She'd been there since she'd woken up at six...it was now a little after ten.

She looked up when she heard a knock at the doorway and saw Steve standing there. "Can I come in?" he asked and Kali nodded, looking back down at the papers.

"You're up," she said as the boy knelt down next to her amidst the sea of paper.

"Yeah," he said.

"Do you feel any better?"

He shrugged a little, "Sure. I guess."

Kali gave him a side-glance and made a quiet sound of disbelief before returning to her work.

They sat in silence for a while, Kali sorting through papers and Steve watching her, before Kali suddenly stopped, staring at an assortment of pages in front of her that she'd sorted in a specific way. "That's it..." she said softly.

"...What?"

"That's it!" she said again, grabbing one of the pages with one hand and Steve's arm with the other, pulling him towards the door.

9. Almost Done

"Kali," Steve said as he was unceremoniously pulled through the warehouse, "What the hell is going on? What did you find?"

Kali didn't respond to his questions as she continued to pull him, stopping once they reached the spot where El and Will were still sitting in the middle of the vast, main room of the building.

"Jane," the young woman said, kneeling next to her sister and handing her the page she had brought with her, "If you look for this building do you think you can find where it is?"

"...I don't know..." El said as she stared down at the piece of paper with a photo of a large, sterile building printed on it, "I've never looked for a place before... Just people..."

"You can do it," Will said, giving the girl a small, encouraging smile. She looked at him for a moment before nodding slightly.

"...I'll try..." she said softly, looking back to her sister, who nodded.

El took a couple minutes to try and prepare herself for what she might find when she went into the in-between place, tying the bandana, which she'd used the previous day to find Jonah, over her eyes.

While she was searching for the new lab, Mike, Lucas, and Dustin came down the stairs and walked over to the small group gathered around El.

"What's going o--" Mike started but was quickly shushed by Kali.

"She's looking for the lab," Will whispered to Mike.

"Already?"

Will nodded and Mike sighed, going to sit next to Eleven.

"Where's Max?" Lucas asked, looking at Steve.

"In the kitchen. Gambling."

"...What?"

"She's playing cards with Funshine and Dottie."

"O...kay..."

Steve took a deep breath and pinched the bridge of his nose for a second, "Yeah, I know. --Look, I'm picking my battles here."

Lucas looked at the older teen for a minute, taking in his pale complexion and overall dishevelment and decided to drop the argument. "...So she's in the kitchen?" he asked.

Steve nodded slightly. "Well, if you can call it that. It's back there," he said, gesturing to the door El had pointed out to him earlier. Lucas nodded to the teenager and made his way to the so-called kitchen.

Dustin had been watching Steve closely since he'd entered the room and was growing increasingly concerned. The older teen didn't seem to be trying to hide that he wasn't feeling well anymore, and this was particularly worrisome. If Steve was admitting that he was sick, even if he still denied just how bad it was, then the teenager might be even worse than Dustin had originally thought.

"...What?" Steve asked, looking at Dustin. The younger boy's eyes widened a little, like a deer caught in headlights.

"H--huh?" the boy stuttered, "Oh-- Nothing. I-- I wasn't..."

Steve sighed tiredly. "Dustin," he said, earning an even more concerned look from the boy. Now he was calling him by his name instead of something like 'shithead'? That wasn't a reassuring sign, "I'll be fine."

"But yesterday you were so..."

"Yesterday I told you, it's just a cold."

"But--"

"--Dustin, I'm fine." This was a lie, they both knew it, and it didn't convince Dustin even slightly. The younger of the two was about to speak again, but was distracted when El pulled the cloth down from her eyes.

"I... I think I found it..." she said softly. Her nose was bleeding sluggishly and she looked more drained than she had the past couple days, making Mike suspect that she'd been over-using her powers.

"Are you sure?" Kali asked, and El looked at her sister.

"Yes. Joyce and Hopper are there. ...And... *He's* there."

Kali nodded once, "Then we need to prepare. We'll leave soon."

Eleven nodded slightly and wiped the blood away from her nose with the back of her hand, but didn't give any other indication that she was going to stand up. She tiredly leaned into Mike, who gently wrapped his arms around her and looked up at Kali. "She needs to rest first," he said, and Kali sighed, even though she knew the boy was was right.

"Alright," she said, "But we leave in an hour."

"We'll be ready," Mike said, and Kali nodded once in confirmation before leaving the room.

Steve moved to sit with El and Mike, gesturing for Will and Dustin to join him, which they did. They sat in silence for a few moments before Steve spoke.

"Hey, you okay, kid?" he asked as he looked at El, "You don't look so good. --We don't have to go with them. We can wait here. You don't have to keep exhausting yourself like this."

The girl stared at him for a second, then shared a look with Mike, Dustin and Will and all four of them knew that they were thinking the same thing: *We could say that same to you.* But none of them said it. Instead, El said, "I can do it... Almost done."

Steve sighed, "Okay."

In theory he knew that she was right, they *were* almost done. They almost had Joyce and Hopper back; but knowing the way these things tended to go for this group, he also knew that it could go on much longer than they anticipated.

He stood up after another couple seconds, getting raised eyebrows from all the kids and a "Where are you going?" from Mike.

"To get Max and Lucas. --You four stay here."

The children watched their temporary guardian leave the room with concern.

"Worse..." El said quietly.

"Yeah," said Mike.

"He actually admitted he was sick," Dustin said, looking worried.

"What should we do?" asked Will.

"He's not gonna stay here; not if El goes with her sister." Mike said.

"We can't let him put himself in danger when he's like this, though!" said Dustin, a slightly irritated edge to his voice that was brought on by worry.

"Maybe we can at least get him to take some Medicine," Will said.

"Yeah. And we'll have to keep him from doing anything that could get him killed when we're there," said Dustin, earning a skeptical look from Mike.

"That's gonna be hard. This is the guy that insisted on being in charge when we went through the tunnels of the upside down even though he had a really bad concussion, remember?"

"I can keep him safe," El said.

The boys nodded in agreement; if anyone could keep their protective, stubborn guardian out of trouble, it was her; although it did make Mike a little nervous when he thought about how exhausted she

already was.

Steve returned a minute later with Lucas and Max, who was holding a wad of bills in one hand, and Lucas' hand with the other. She had a satisfied smile on her lips and the four kids looked up at her with surprise.

"How much money did you win?" Will asked.

"Like fifty bucks," Max said, "Arcade is on me this weekend."

This got several cheers from the boys, except for Dustin, preoccupied with observing Steve, who was looking more tired by the minute.

"Yeah, we're all very proud of your illegal gambling," the oldest of the group said to Max, a slight tone of sarcasm clear in his voice, "Now stay here. I'll be right back."

"Where are you going now?" Mike asked.

"I gotta talk to Kali and make it clear that none of you are gonna be put in the middle of this shit."

"But we're coming with you," said Max in a tone that made it clear that she wasn't asking, which made Steve sigh, feeling defeated.

"Yeah," he said, "You're coming."

10. The Lab

Author's Note: I'm sorry this update took so long! Real life has been busy lately, but things are slowing down a little, so I should be able to update a little more often now. Now without further ado, chapter ten!

The ride to the lab was long and quiet. There was no rock music blasting on the car stereo this time, nor was anyone was talking.

Will, Lucas, Max, Dustin and Steve were squeezed together in the far back of the van, and though none of them said anything, it was clear that the children were all worried about the older teenager. Dustin hadn't looked away from Steve's face since they'd entered the van, which was starting to make the older of the two a little uncomfortable. He knew the kids were worried, but he also knew that there was nothing he could say to ease their concerns -- especially with his voice sounding like it had been through a blender -- so he didn't try. Instead he sat quietly; except for the painful coughs that occasionally escaped his lungs despite his best efforts to suppress them.

El and Mike were sitting in the middle part of the van with Kali, Dottie and Funshine. They sat in silence, and El could feel her anxiety growing as she realized what she was going to have to do to get the rest of her family back. Mike noticed this and took her hand, giving it a reassuring squeeze and whispering, "It's gonna be okay." The girl nodded slightly, though she didn't seem very convinced.

By the time they reached the lab it was nightfall, and as Mick pulled into the large, empty parking lot everyone looked through the windows of the van, staring up at the tall building.

There was a string of hushed profanities from inside the vehicle, both from Kali's gang and the children.

"Jesus, Kal."

"Holy shit."

"Jesus..."

Kali hesitated for a moment, not sure if she was ready to face this particular demon from her past after all, but then she looked at El and knew that she couldn't let her sister down. She'd promised to get back the policeman and the woman who seemed to now be a mother figure to El, and she couldn't go back on that promise. Not now.

She slid open the door, slowly stepping out. "Leave the masks," she said, earning a few confused outcries from her friends.

"What?!"

"Are you insane!?"

"We will get caught immediately."

"This is different, than the others," Kali said in reply to their concerns, "We won't need to hide -- he already knows who we are. And when I'm done with him, we won't need to worry about him telling anyone else about us."

El swallowed hard at that. She wanted the man out of her life as much as Kali did, but when the time came, she wasn't sure she'd be able to go through with it.

Mike, of course, noticed this and gave her a small nod of reassurance. She gave him a small smile of thanks and squeezed his hand back, then followed her sister out of the van, with Mike following right behind her. The others quickly followed suit, and they all soon entered the intimidating building.

They were met by two guards who barely had the chance to register what was going on before Eleven threw out her arm, forcing the two men across the room and knocking them out against the wall.

Dottie giggled, "I never get sick of that."

Steve sighed and muttered, "Jesus... Let's get this over with..."

They made their way through the many long and winding hallways of the lab, which was suspiciously quiet and empty.

"...This is a setup," Max said as they made their way through the many long and winding hallways of the lab, which was suspiciously quiet and empty, and Lucas nodded in agreement.

"I think she's right," he said.

"If it is, it doesn't change anything," Kali said, "If this is a setup, he'll stay to see his handiwork."

"And we *want* him here?" Steve asked. It was a loaded question for both Kali and El. On the one hand, yes, they wanted -- or needed, at least in Kali's case -- to face him, but on the other, of course they never wanted to see him again. Neither girl responded and Steve sighed, but didn't press the matter.

They reached a long hallway filled with heavy doors, only one of which was open. This hallway struck a shockingly similar resemblance to the rooms that Kali and Eleven were held in when they were children, and they both stopped in their tracks as they realized this.

"Hey," Mike said softly, taking El's hand in his own, "It's gonna be okay. ...You're not alone this time." El smiled and nodded slightly.

Kali stared at the two children, tears involuntarily springing to her eyes before suddenly feeling a gentle, protective arm wrap around her shoulders.

"You okay?" Steve whispered and she roughly wiped the tears from her eyes.

"Fine," she said, taking a step forward into the hallway.

They walked for several minutes, everyone unsettled by the quiet moaning, crying, and muttering behind the heavy closed doors, before they heard footsteps coming towards them.

There was a chorus of whispered profanities from the group, and a moment of scrambling to find a place to hide before Kali threw open one of the doors that she'd noticed had been left somewhat ajar and ushered everyone inside.

It was small -- far too small for them all to properly fit -- and they had to huddle together, barely breathing so as not to make noise and attract attention.

"...Wait," Max whispered, "If they find us, they might take us to wherever their keeping Mrs. Byers and the chief."

"That's a good point," Lucas said, smiling at Max.

"Yeah," said Mike, "or they'll take us somewhere else and make it even harder for us to find them -- or even escape."

"That's also a good point," Dustin said.

The footsteps sounded as though they were right outside the door now, and Steve shushed the children.

"No. We're not just handing ourselves in to them. That'll just put us--" he was cut off by a brief coughing fit here and internally cursed himself when he heard the footsteps stop on the other side of the door.

11. Not Here

Author's Note: I'm so sorry for the long gaps between chapters! Real life had been a bit hectic lately, leaving little time for writing, but I promise I haven't abandoned you all! I will finish this fic! There will be one more chapter after this one, and then the fic will be finished.

Hope you enjoy this chapter!!

-LizzySong

"Oh, shit!"

"Kali, do something!"

"I told you we shouldn't've brought the sick one."

"It's not Steve's fault!"

"Everybody, shut up!"

Kali ignored the outbursts from the group and exchanged a look with her sister, who nodded in agreement with what she knew Kali was thinking.

The door slowly opened and everyone stiffened, Steve instinctively stepped in front of the kids, and Kali gave her band of misfits a look that clearly said to stand down. This earned her some confused looks, but they obeyed none the less.

"What are you doing?" Mike whispered to El, confused.

"Max was right," she responded simply.

Mike turned to look at her, his eyes widened in shock, "But--"

He didn't have time to continue, however, because two guards entered the small room.

No one put up a fight, knowing that this had become part of their

plan, and though the guards found it slightly disconcerting that a group of intruders wasn't resisting, they did as they'd been instructed and threw them all into two small interrogation rooms, splitting them up.

The six children were put in one room, and Kali, Steve, and the rest of the gang in another. This was the one point when Steve nearly started a fight, refusing to let himself be separated from the kids, but he stopped himself when El gave him a reassuring nod which Steve knew meant that she would take care of the group. He knew she would, too. So he allowed himself to be thrown in a tiny room with Kali and four other people he hardly knew, away from the kids he'd promised to protect.

"They'll be alright," Kali whispered, "Jane will keep them safe." The boy nodded slightly in response, not looking at her.

"Yeah... I know she will. I just..." He said, trailing off.

"I know."

He felt a hand on his shoulder and finally looked at the girl standing next to him, seeing her looking up at him with a small, sad smile, and suddenly he felt guilty.

Steve remembered everything that Kali had told him the previous night; how she'd found a family only to be ripped from them again, and that seeing El's makeshift family hurt her... and especially the fact that it hurt her to look at him because he reminded her of what she didn't have.

Now she was back in the exact situation she'd escaped from...and she was comforting *him*. ...It should've been the other way 'round.

"...I'm sorry," he said quietly.

Meanwhile the children were greeted by a welcome sight in another room.

"Will?!" a woman's voice said in surprise. Joyce Byers stood up from one of the two chairs that were positioned at a small interrogation table and quickly made her way to her son, who was still standing

with his small group of friends at the doorway.

"Mom?" he hugged her tightly, burying his face in her shoulder. "You're okay..." he whispered, trying not to cry.

Joyce hugged him back just as tightly, if not a little more so, and didn't try to hide her own tears.

"Did they find you? How did you get here? Did they hurt you?" she asked when they finally pulled apart. She was angry. Not at Will, or any of the other children, they knew that, but with the people who had caused so much pain in the lives of her family and so many others.

This time El answered, stepping forward to be closer to Joyce. "Steve helped us. ...And my sister."

The mother hugged El close when she had finished speaking and the girl smiled slightly, feeling safer than she had in days.

"Where are they now?" Joyce asked when the two pulled apart.

"Don't know..." Eleven said quietly, shaking her head a little, "They put them somewhere else..."

Joyce nodded slightly, a worried look crossing her face. They stood in silence for a few moments before El spoke again, "...Where's Hopper?" There was fear in her voice, and Joyce placed a comforting hand on her shoulder.

"I'm not sure, sweetie... They separated us, just like they separated you kids..."

El nodded slightly in understanding and swallowed hard, trying not to show how worried she was and failing miserably.

"Hey..." Joyce said, gently pulling the young teen into a motherly hug, "He'll be alright. You know Hop." She pulled back slightly to give El a small smile which the younger returned.

"...So what do we do now?" Max asked, "We can't try to escape now that we're separated. We can't leave them behind." She was trying to

hide her obvious fear and anxiety with logical questions.

"This was your plan," Mike said with an edge to his voice, "You tell us." He still hadn't truly accepted Max into the party, even now that El was back, and with the added stress of being in the lab and being separated from half of their group, he was looking for someone to blame. And as always, Max was right there.

"This wasn't part of my plan. We weren't supposed to get separated."

"But we did. And now we're stuck here. We were supposed to be helping! We weren't supposed to put ourselves and Steve and El's sister in *more* danger!"

Max was flustered now. Normally she could handle Mike's outbursts directed at her, but right now it felt like he was right. And she didn't know what to say.

"It's not her fault, man," Lucas said, deciding it was time he step into the argument, "She was the only one who came up with any kind of plan." Max gave him a small smile at that and he returned it.

"Nobody asked her to come up with a plan!" Mike yelled and El placed her hand on his shoulder, gently.

"Mike..." she said, "We agreed. Me and Kali. We agreed with Max."

Joyce decided that this was the point when she needed to step in. She understood what the children were feeling. She knew they were all frightened, and that sometimes fear showed itself in anger. But that still didn't warrant Mike's attitude to Max.

"It isn't any of your faults'," the woman said gently, "The people who run this *place*... It's their fault. Not any of you. We'll find the others and we'll find a way out. I promise. But right now we all need to calm down."

The children were slightly taken aback by the mother's calm demeanor, usually knowing her to be high strung and anxious. But when placed as the sole caretaker of these six children -- one of whom was her own son -- she understood that she needed to be calm for them. Especially Will and Eleven.

Mike sighed and walked over to the small interrogation table, sitting down in one of the uncomfortable metal chairs. El followed and sat next to him, taking his hand in her own reassuringly.

Max and Lucas found their own corner of the room to sit in, Max resting her head on his shoulder, Lucas wrapping his arms protectively around her.

Only Will and Dustin stayed by the door with Mrs. Byers, who put a protective arm around Will's shoulders, pulling him into another hug for a moment. Then she looked at both boys with a slightly accusatory look, realizing that Dustin hadn't said a word since entering the room, which was extremely uncharacteristic for him, "There's something your not telling me."

Will and Dustin exchanged a look and then turned their gaze back to Joyce, "It's Steve..." Will said.

"He's really sick," said Dustin when Will trailed off, and Joyce frowned in concern.

In another room similar to the one Joyce and the children were in, Steve, Kali, and the rest of her gang had also broken off into smaller groups around the room.

Kali and Steve were sitting at the small interrogation table in the room, just like El and Mike. Mick, Dottie, and Funshine were standing in a corner of the small room, talking quietly. And Axel was sitting in a corner of his own, messing around with his switchblade.

"...Hey, you okay?" Steve asked gently, looking at Kali. She hadn't said a word since she'd reassured him that El would protect the other kids.

"I'm fine," Kali said in a soft, almost cold tone and Steve knew that she was lying; but he also knew that she couldn't be honest in front of her crew -- that would show weakness, and that was one thing Kali would never do. So he dropped it.

Kali continued to stare at him, though; taking in how unnaturally pale he was, the slight sheen of sweat on his forehead, and the

shallow, wheezing breaths he was taking which seemed to catch in his chest every once in a while as he tried not to cough. He'd gotten worse, even since just last night, and she couldn't help but feel somewhat responsible.

She hesitated, then took his hand in her own. He gave her a surprised, questioning look, but before either of them could say a word, the heavy door was thrown open and a man, who was clearly struggling against someone, was thrown in.

Kali and Steve stood up from the table they'd been sitting at, the others in the room looking over but not completely stopping what they were doing.

"Chief Hopper?" Steve said as he quickly made his way to the help the man who seemed to be struggling to stand.

"Harrington?" Hopper said as the younger man helped him over to the table, "What the hell are you doing here?"

"Is this Jane's policeman?" Kali asked and Steve nodded.

Steve got Hopper into a chair and the older man groaned slightly, looking up at Steve, "Harrington, what are you doing here?" he asked again, more of an edge to his voice than before.

"We were looking for you and Mrs. Byers," Steve said hesitantly.

"...We?" Hopper asked accusingly, "Did you bring my daughter to this place?" He stood up, making Steve feel small. Jim had a few inches on the boy, but to Steve that had little effect compared to the anger being directed at him.

"I wouldn't've found you without the kids' help."

"Then you shouldn't have found me! If you wanted to help them, you should have taken care of them. You shouldn't have brought them here."

"It's not his fault," Kali interjected, "Jane is perfectly capable of taking care of herself and her friends."

"And you must be the sister," Hopper turned to face her, "Who tried to turn El into a street punk."

"I did not try to turn her into anything. I simply encouraged her to use her gifts instead of forcing her to hide them."

"I'm not going to argue with a teenager about parenting -- I've learned more and lost more as a parent than you've learned in your entire life."

--The kids are fine, Chief," Steve cut in before the rest of Kali's friends decided to get involved -- he could see them starting to become more on edge and he didn't want to have to try and break up a full blown fist fight. "I pro--" he was cut off by a short string of sharp coughs before trying the last word again, "...promise."

Hopper knit his eyebrows together as the boy struggled to get out his reassurances about the kids' safety, and when the teenager finished talking, the police chief reached out his hand and gently placed it on Steve's forehead for a moment before pulling away. "Jesus, kid!"

"I'm fine," Steve said.

"Kid, you're burning up."

"I'm fine," the teenager repeated, more defensively than before.

"You're not," Kali said before Hopper could get another word in, "But we don't have time for that right now; we need to get to him."

Jim gave Steve a look that made it clear that the younger man wasn't going to get off the hook that easily, then turned his attention to Kali.

"You need to get to who?" he asked, "Brenner?" She nodded in response before the policeman continued, "He's not here."

"What?!" Kali and Steve both said in unison.

"He's gone."

"Shit!" said Steve.

"...It's a trap," said Kali.

"What?"

"Don't you see? This is a trap! He set us up!" she was starting to panic, which was uncharacteristic for her, but understandable under the circumstances, and Hopper put a hand on her shoulder to try and steady her.

"Hey, it's okay. We're gonna get you out of here. --You and all of your weird friends back there," he said, nodding his head in the direction of Kali's friends, "I promise."